

To hell with Aeneas: looking backwards and forwards in *Aeneid* 6

Fiachra Mac Góráin

The word *tandem* ('at last') near the very beginning of *Aeneid* 6 carries its full meaning. Finally the Trojans reach Italy, their fated destination, but not before five books' worth of adventures in Carthage and around the Mediterranean since the capture and destruction of Troy. This arrival marks the transition from the Odyssean wanderings of the first half of the epic to the Iliadic war which the Trojans must win in order to found their new city. It is here in Italy, and especially in the underworld, that Aeneas pauses to reflect on his past before he is free to lay the foundations of a Roman future. Here Fiachra Mac Góráin explores some of the ways in which both hero and poet build on the past and look to the future in this pivotal book.

From the past to the future: respecting tradition

Aeneas and the Trojans finally reach Italy as book 6 begins. They have just celebrated funeral games for Aeneas' father Anchises on Sicily, and left behind those who were too weak to continue the journey. This represents a decisive break with the past. Aeneas has a mandate to consult the Sibyl of Cumae, a priestess of Apollo. In a prophetic frenzy she foretells a great war on Italian soil and reveals to Aeneas what he must do to gain access to the underworld and speak to his father. After Aeneas has found the golden bough and buried his comrade Misenus, the Sibyl guides him through the underworld, where they encounter a host of shades from Aeneas' past, including the deceased helmsman Palinurus, Dido, and the Trojan prince Deiphobus. They hear the groans and lashings of Tartarus, the abode of the damned, and the Sibyl delivers a run-through of the sinners. Finally they hurry on to Elysium where the spirit of Anchises encourages Aeneas with a stirring vision of his glorious descendants from his posthumous son Silvius through Romulus

all the way to Julius Caesar and of course Augustus.

Aeneas displays virtues that are quintessentially Roman, and his character is consistent with the ideals which Augustus was keen to promote: religious, social, and familial. Pius Aeneas, as Virgil calls him, scrupulously fulfils his duties to the gods, to his family, and to his fatherland. The first third of the book shows him reverently addressing Apollo and the Cumaean Sibyl. Readers are bound to think of Augustus' special relationship with Apollo and of the temple of Palatine Apollo which he dedicated in 28 B.C. to commemorate his victory at the Battle of Actium. Aeneas continues to display piety as he observes precisely the rituals which the Sibyl prescribes before he may enter the underworld. The book exhibits a profound sense of religious awe, and one which Virgil himself corroborates by taking a rare step forward and requesting permission from the gods of the underworld to lay bare their secrets. Aeneas' visit to his father on an intelligence-seeking mission resonates with Augustus' devotion to the memory of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar.

Leaving the past behind

The central third of the book, perhaps its emotional core, contains three encounters between Aeneas and characters from earlier in the epic. They each represent different dimensions of the hero's experience, and between them exemplify three different ways of imposing closure on the past. By means of these encounters Aeneas moves from being an obsessively retrospective character to a more prospective one. Like Aeneas and the Trojans, the Romans were at a historical crossroads and acutely conscious of the burden of the recent past. Virgil's epic aimed to explore the concerns of Roman history through the vehicle of myth. By showing how Aeneas used the scars of his past to prepare for his future, the poem might have something to teach the war-weary Roman people.

Palinurus, the helmsman who had fallen from his ship at the end of book 5, symbolizes the Trojans' wanderings. Aeneas finds him among the shades of the unburied who have to linger for a hundred years in a kind of limbo before being granted passage across the river Styx. Although the Sibyl must refuse his request

to be ferried across, she assures him that neighbouring tribes will grant him burial rites, and that a place will be named after him. (You can still visit Punta di Palinuro.) Temporarily at least, Palinurus is gladdened by the prospect of this commemorative naming.

There is no such relief in Aeneas' meeting with Dido, which revisits the Carthaginian love story of the first four books. Aeneas catches sight of her among the unhappy lovers in the Fields of Mourning. He speaks to her more tenderly than he had done in Book Four, with love and pity, but she remains unmoved like hard flint or Marpesian rock, and responds with implacable silence. The dramatic scene shows profound pain and sadness on both sides. Dido is one of the many 'collateral' victims of Rome's rise to world dominion, and her scene here gains prominence from its position in the very centre of the book. Aeneas too must accept the wounds of the past and move on.

Deiphobus' house is the first house whose destruction Aeneas reports in book 2 in his account of the taking of Troy, and so it is highly appropriate for Deiphobus to appear in the underworld and reprise the story of that same night. He absolves Aeneas of any guilt for not having managed to bury his body, gives his own version of events to complement Aeneas' story, and asks Aeneas what brings him alive to the underworld. The Sibyl warns against wasting hours in lamentation and chivvies Aeneas along to Elysium. In response Deiphobus wishes him well in ringing tones of respect and enthusiasm, and Aeneas is released from the bonds of the past.

From Greek literature to Roman politics

Aeneas is not the only one who needs to learn from the past and use it in moving on to create a new future. Virgil himself drew on a rich and varied literary tradition in composing book 6. The principal structural model was book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*, and many of Aeneas' encounters find direct ancestry there. For example, the three encounters which we have just considered are based on Odysseus' meetings with the shades of Elpenor, Ajax, and Agamemnon. Virgil produces meaningful tensions by creatively adapting certain details from his sources. Most importantly, Virgil introduces Roman colouring to his use of Greek models. Before reaching Elysium, the Sibyl enumerates a catalogue of sinners condemned to eternal punishment. Some of these, such as Tityos and Tantalus, are drawn from Homer's *Nekyia*; but the Sibyl goes on to cite those guilty of crimes that continued to beset contemporary Rome, and which Augustus wished to eliminate: strife within families,

betrayal of patron-client relations, greed, and adultery.

It was a masterstroke of narrative genius to use the Platonic and Pythagorean theory of transmigration of souls to facilitate Anchises showing Aeneas a parade of as-yet-unborn heroes who would be his Roman descendants. As with the shield of Aeneas in book 8, the original readers will have sensed a paradox in Roman history being narrated in the future tense. But here too Virgil has romanized his sources, weaving the language and motifs of Latin epic by Ennius and Lucretius into Anchises' philosophical exposition and historical catalogue.

An essential ingredient in Roman rhetoric and historiography was the effective use of exempla from the past, which provided lessons in how and (no less important) how not to behave. Virgil's contemporary, the historian Livy, prefaced his compendium with the remark that it was a repository of exempla which aimed to teach the Romans which kinds of behaviour they should imitate, and which kinds they should avoid. While the parade of heroes is arguably the most patriotic and Roman part of the *Aeneid*, and while Anchises uses it to inspire Aeneas with joy and love for the fame of his descendants, neither does Virgil shy away from more problematic episodes in history, such as the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, or the dubious patriotism of Brutus, who had his sons executed for plotting treason against the Republic. Looking back to and learning from Rome's history was not a wholly straightforward or unambiguously positive thing to do. But Virgil is clearly not a poet to evade difficult issues, since he chooses to make our 'hero' kill his opponent ruthlessly at the end of the work, as he kneels wounded and begging for mercy.

The poem's future

Book 6 furnishes some piquant episodes in the history of later authors' use of Virgil. The biographical tradition records that when Virgil recited selections of the epic to Augustus, Octavia who was also present fainted in distress when the poet reached the lines on her late son and Augustus' adopted heir Marcellus ('*tu Marcellus eris*'). This story itself inspired a number of painters. A series of commentators stretching from antiquity to the Renaissance read the *Aeneid* allegorically as a kind of 'pilgrim's progress', with Aeneas on a journey of religious and spiritual purification. These critics were especially interested in the mystical elements of book 6: to Fulgentius (6th century) Virgil's golden bough signified learning, whereas to Cristoforo Landino (15th century) it suggested wisdom. Both inter-

preted the burial of Misenus as the rejection of empty glory, a prerequisite to achieving spiritual wisdom. Book 6 provided the richest seam of inspiration for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the Florentine epic in three books which reflects the tripartite topography of Virgil's underworld: Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise.

In modern times T. S. Eliot was fascinated by the figure of the Cumae Sibyl while writing *The Waste Land*. *Aeneid* 6 continues to attract the attention of poets, critics, and translators. In a recent book of interviews entitled *Stepping Stones*, Irish Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney speaks of his long-standing interest in *Aeneid* 6: 'there's one Virgilian journey that has indeed been a constant presence, and that is Aeneas's venture into the underworld. The motifs in Book VI have been in my head for years – the golden bough, Charon's barge, the quest to meet the shade of the father.' Heaney's most recent collection of poems, *Human Chain*, contains 'The Riverbank Field' (based on Virgil's Elysium) and his 'Route 110' cycle, a searching engagement with *Aeneid* 6, which descends into the underworld of the poet's memory. The engaging and enticing quality of Virgil's extraordinary and imaginative leap into the bowels of Hell seems destined to keep its appeal.

Fiachra Mac Góráin teaches Greek and Latin literature at University College London.